
Little-known African bird:

The enigmatic Bates's Weaver *Ploceus batesi*

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Un oiseau africain peu connu: l'énigmatique Tisserin de Bates *Ploceus batesi*. Le Tisserin de Bates *Ploceus batesi* n'est connu que de quelques localités dans la forêt humide dense du Sud Cameroun. L'espèce a été décrite en 1908 et nommée d'après George Latimer Bates (1863–1940), qui collecta le spécimen type, une femelle, près du Dja, en janvier 1906. En 1908 un deuxième spécimen, un mâle adulte, fut collecté près de Kumangola et l'année suivante quatre oiseaux furent pris à Bitye. Bates n'a jamais observé ces oiseaux dans la nature lui-même: ils furent tous trouvés et tués avec des flèches par de jeunes villageois. Quelques autres spécimens furent collectés par la suite, étendant l'aire de distribution connue vers l'ouest et l'est. En 1978, l'espèce a été vue deux fois dans la forêt classée de Douala-Edéa, près de la côte, et l'année suivante un oiseau était observé près de Limbe, au pied du Mont Cameroun. Récemment, l'espèce a été vue au Mont Kupe (deux fois en 1990) et près de la Réserve du Dja (deux observations). Pratiquement rien n'est connu de sa biologie. Le tisserin a été observé seul, en couple et dans un groupe mixte d'oiseaux insectivores. Il se nourrit d'insectes et semble chercher sa nourriture en prospectant l'écorce des troncs et des grosses branches, à la façon du Tisserin de Preuss *P. preussi*, avec qui il pourrait être en compétition. La raison pour laquelle le Tisserin de Bates, considéré comme Menacé d'extinction, est si rare, demeure un mystère.

Bates's Weaver, known only from a few localities in southern Cameroon's lowland rainforest, was described in 1908 by Richard Bowdler Sharpe as *Othyphantes batesi* (Sharpe 1908). The new species was named after George Latimer Bates (1863–1940), who collected the type specimen, a female 'not quite in full plumage' near the Dja River on 29 January 1906. Although the precise locality was not mentioned and the Dja River traverses quite a large area, the bird was presumably taken in the vicinity of Bitye, near the south-western border of the present-day Dja Biosphere Reserve, where Bates had settled not long before and from where he made numerous short collecting trips. 'Bitye' was apparently the way local people pronounced 'Bates' (Kinnear 1940). In 1908 a second specimen, an adult male, was collected at nearby Kumangola (Ogilvie-Grant 1910, Sharpe 1910), and in the following year four more birds were taken at Bitye and sent to the British Museum (Bannerman 1949). Bates never observed these birds alive: they were all taken by local boys with bows and arrows (Bates 1930). Additional specimens were subsequently collected at Lolodorf and Sangmélima, extending the species' known range westward (Bannerman 1949, Good 1953), and on the Dja River at Moloundou,

on the border with Congo-Brazzaville, to the east (Louette 1981). In 1978, the species was observed twice at Tissongo in the Douala-Edéa Forest Reserve, near the coast (Collar & Stuart 1985) and the following year one was seen near Limbe (Victoria), at the foot of Mt Cameroon (Taylor 1981), further extending the range to the west. In recent years, it has only been seen on Mt Kupe (twice in 1990) and near the Dja reserve (at Somalomo in 1995 and at Shwani, 12 km from Somalomo, in 1996) (BirdLife International 2000, 2006).

Almost nothing is known of the species' biology. It has been observed singly and in pairs, and Bates (1930) reports that at least one of his specimens was in a mixed-species flock of insectivores. Although its habitat is lowland rainforest (to 900 m on Mt Kupe), all recent records are from secondary forest and forest edge, including degraded forest near villages (BirdLife International 2006). Bates's Weaver takes insects and appears to forage in the manner of the bark-gleaning Preuss's Weaver *P. preussi*, with which it may compete (Bates 1930, Bannerman 1949, BirdLife International 2006). Why it should be so rare remains a mystery. Its rarity is perhaps due to the loss of some specific habitat feature (BirdLife



Adult male Bates's Weaver / Tisserin de Bates, mâle adulte *Ploceus batesi* (Pete Leonard)

International 2006), but the species was apparently already rare at the time of its discovery (Bates 1930). It is currently listed as Endangered.

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